



Antihumanism in "Richard Wright's Native Son and Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets"- A Naturalistic Reading

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to investigate "Richard Wright's Native Son and Stephen Crane's Maggie" from antihumanist point of view. Antihumanism highlights the role of other factors in leading human life. The methodology that is used in this research is based on Althusser's antihumanism, his method is evident in his structuralist Marxism, an ideology that rejects reason and free will. That is replaced by misrecognition, capitalism, repression, and interpellation. In "A Girl of the Streets and Native Son", the characters are social outcasts, not because of their free will, but from deterministic situations of their lives. This means that antihumanism functions in determining who they are. This article is going to study "Wright's Native Son and Crane's Maggie" in light of ideology of European Naturalism. The findings show that the main characters in both novels live in antihumanist society and they are exposed to its external forces.

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Received: 07 August 2025
Accepted: 27 August 2025
Published: 01 November 2025

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol21.Iss4.1252>



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Cite:

Al Jasim, U. M. J. M. (n.d.). Antihumanism in "Richard Wright's Native Son and Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets"- A Naturalistic Reading. Wasit Journal for Human Sciences, 21(4). <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol21.Iss4.1252>

Keywords: Antihumanism, Ideology, Naturalistic, Misrecognition, Interpellation.

اللا-إنسانية في روايتي "ابن البلد" لريتشارد رايت و"ماجي: فتاة من

الشارع" لستيفن كرين – قراءة طبيعية (واقعية مفرطة)

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المستخلص

هدف هذه الدراسة هو التحقيق في روايتي ريتشارد رايت "ابن البلد" وستيفن كرين "ماجي" من وجهة نظر ضد الإنسانية. حيث تسلط اللا-إنسانية الضوء على دور عوامل أخرى في توجيه الحياة البشرية، مما يظهر أن حياة الفرد خاضعة تمامًا للحتمية. تعتمد المنهجية المستخدمة في هذا البحث على اللا-إنسانية لدى ألتوسير، وتظهر طريقته في الماركسية الهيكلية التي ترفض أي شكل من أشكال الأنثروبولوجيا أو القيم المتعلقة بالحرية الإنسانية، وهي إيديولوجية ترفض العقل والإرادة الحرة. يتم استبدال ذلك بسوء الفهم ، والرأسمالية، والقمع، و الاستجاب. في كل من "ماجي: فتاة من الشوارع" و "ابن البلد" الشخصيات مجرمون ومهمشون اجتماعياً، و لكن ليس ذلك بسبب إرادتهم الحرة، ولكن نتيجةً للظروف الحتمية في حياتهم. وهذا يعني أن المعادة للإنسانية تلعب دوراً في تحديد هويتهم ، مع وضع الفرضية أعلاه في الاعتبار، ستقوم هذه المقالة بدراسة "ابن البلد" لرايت و"ماجي" لكرين في ضوء إيديولوجية الطبيعية الأوروبية. تظهر النتائج أن الشخصيات الرئيسية في الروايتين تعيش في مجتمع معادٍ للإنسانية وأنها تعرضت لإيديولوجياته كقوى خارجية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللا-إنسانية ، الأيديولوجيا، طبيعية ، سوء الفهم ، الاستجاب

1.Introduction

Antihumanism refers to a type of philosophy that human's metaphysical existence is not accounted for. In this philosophy, the concepts of humanity and values are replaced and man is devoid of rationality and logic. As a result, his actions and conducts are not the result of his conscious state and whatever he does has been determined before. Regarding this idea, it might be said that the human being cannot be taken as the center of the world and concepts such as freedom and logic are illusions and as Mohammed Atta mentioned "Human nature has freedom in its actions, because free actions in their meaning change the nature of God, and God does not change, so freedom cannot be done because people do not choose in their actions" (Atta, 2025. p. 838) . This means that cognition does not play any significant role in man's life and every action is left top other external forces including social and biological forces. "*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *Native Son*" deal with the function of ideology as the main aspect of ideology in which social determinism shapes and constructs a subject's identity. In "*Native Son*", Bigger Thomas, a poor, uneducated, twenty-year-old black man has grown up under the climate of harsh racial prejudice in 1930s United states. Bigger is burdened with a powerful conviction that he has no control over his life and that he cannot succeed. In this novel, the ideology of the ruling class which creates existence and false consciousness functions. "*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*" shows the story of some poor kids who want to be rich and wealthy; however, the social and dominant rules of the society do not allow it happen since they have to be the victims of the social determinism. In the novel of *Maggie*, the main character is Maggie whose destiny

is bound with her social forces of life. She becomes the victim of a wealthy young man who abuses and abandons her. Maggie has no free will over her life and as antihumanist values suggest, she becomes the victim of ideology.

This research article intends to read two American novels "Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Stephen Crane's *Maggie*", with the background of ideological function as defined by Althusser and his theory. In his concept which is deterministic and affected by social and European naturalism, self-determination does not work. Likewise, these two novels shatter these American illusions which are mostly based on American dream and depict American society as a contributing factor to corruption and destruction. The reason why these two novels have been chosen is because of their common grounds both in literary movement as American Naturalism, their inspiration from European Naturalism, and in their plot. While Richard Wright's "*Native Son*" follows the story of a young man who is involved in robbery, murder, and prosecution as a result of poverty, Stephen Crane's *Maggie* traces the life of an unfortunate and poverty-stricken girl whose endeavors in improving her life is undermined by her mother's drunken rages and is finally led to a life of corruption. Antihumanism started to emerge in France in twentieth century and opposed philosophy of Hegel and Kant whose principals were regarded as humanist as Atta stated "Existential philosophy affirms that human freedom is the basis of values, it continues the legacy of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, which affirms that the self is the source of law, duty, and right." (Atta, 2025. p. 840), furthermore, Meillassoux argues "The central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of correlation. By 'correlation' we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other." (Meillassoux, 2008. p. 5) . Althusser's method of antihumanism is shown in his structuralist Marxism that refuses any form of anthropology or values related to the human freedom. His antihumanism is vividly shown against the background of the Marxist subjects. Since Althusser created the technical word of 'antihumanism', antihumanism has come to have many meanings, as many as humanism itself once did. His ideas show a contemporary rejection of humanistic aims and claims. Moreover, "They turned toward the future, not toward Antiquity as humanists had; they placed their faith in reason, not texts; and they harbored suspicions about religion while entertaining bold plans to remold society, both of which would have off ended humanists" (Miernowski,2016. p. 25).

Althusser's antihumanist idea shows that how human being has changed. He regards subjectivity as a construction of different social forces without any freedom. Therefore, Louise Althusser a Marxists in parts of his philosophy but he does not give a title to his methods.

2. Discussion

American bourgeois society which is based on the tradition depicts a principle of self-reliance, and

aristocratic belief in socio-economic development of the country. Stephen Crane's *"Maggie: A Girl of the Streets"* can be considered as an antihumanist text since it highlights the role of determinism and fate in characters' life. The novel shows the role of social and economic condition in victimizing humanity. However, it reflects a more complicated system of thought which affect the life of the main character and it shows that her mind and her personality are under the effect of ideology as it was shown by Crane "Maggie always departed with raised spirits from these melodramas. She rejoiced at the way in which the poor and virtuous eventually overcame the wealthy and wicked." (Crane, 1893, p. 60). The life condition of Maggie manifests the fact that naturalistic view towards life is dominant which makes Maggie as an object of anti-humanist. Maggie lives in a materialistic society which follows the rules of naturalism. Living under this condition, naturalism shows a material universe where environmental factors determine life destiny and the characters' free will is absent.

Stephen Crane's *Maggie* is full of social tensions of miscellaneous classes in the nineteenth century where politics and the rank of power are considered significant. As a result, the whole work mirrors the antihumanist structure which is a rejection of Marx's humanism as Althusser states that:

"the whole classical Marxist tradition has refused to say that Marxism is Humanism. Why? Because practically, i.e. in the facts, the word Humanism is exploited by an ideology which uses it to fight, i.e. to kill, another, true, word, and one vital to the proletariat: the class struggle" (Althusser, 1965, *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 22).

From the beginning of the novel, grouping people from different classes of society can be seen as the author writes:

"Ah, go ahn, replied the other argumentatively, Jimmie replied with heavy contempt, Ah, youse can't fight, Blue Billie! I kin lick yeh wid one han, Ah, go ahn, replied Billie again, Ah, said Jimmie threateningly, Ah, said the other in the same tone, they struck at each other, clinched, and rolled over on the cobble stones" (Crane, 1893, p. 9).

The social tension is shown symbolically in this part as Billie and Jimmie are not equal. When working class in society realize the situation and start to rebel against the dominant injustice in the society, they can improve the situation and move the society towards socialism and communism in which money is no longer in use and has no exchange or sign value, and people are equal. Therefore, financial situation of the society can put pressure on working class and limit them in other aspects. The result of this condition is that the working class attempts to fight for their own rights. Jimmie is associated with all the features of a working class member in the American society. Crane gives a description of Jimmie:

"A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley. He was throwing stones at howling urchins from Devil's Row who were circling madly about the heap and

pelting at him. His infantile countenance was livid with fury.” (Crane, 1893, p. 2)

Jimmie is shown as a small and weak boy; however, he is not afraid of the bullies who face him. Although he is warned to escape and run, he mentions that he is not afraid of anyone which signifies the social conflict between different groups in the society. There are other proofs which show Jimmie is the member of a lower class society. The language which is used by Crane in the beginning of the novel points out the way in which lower class people speak. When Jimmie’s sister yold him to wash his blood, his response was not polite, influenced by the poor condition of his life: “Are yeh shurted much, Jimmie? she whispered timidly. Not a damn bit! See? growled the little boy, Will I wash deh blood? Naw! Will I, When I catch dat Riley kid I’ll break, is face! Dat’s right! See? (Crane, 1893, p. 13). In fact, Jimmie is the symbol of an antihumanist society in which the members of the society are not ruled and governed by logic but by other external forces.

Through the experiences of his black protagonist Bigger Thomas, Wright shows how racial segregation influences the destiny of the black people in the society. Throughout the novel, Wright depicts that Bigger was not born a criminal; rather he has turned into a violent subject and he had no control over his actions. He is regarded as the native son that means he is a product of the violence and racism in the devastating social conditions in which he was raised. In fact, the author shows the how antihumanism functions in this society. The author demonstrates that much of the racial inequality was caused by lack of awareness and rationality which reject the Hegelian notion of humanism. The opening of the novel and the description of the setting intensifies the disastrous condition of the black people. The book opens with “light flooded the room and revealed a black boy standing in a narrow space between two iron beds” (Wright, 1940.p ‘ 19). This is a very small place in which several people are living. “Turn your heads so I can dress, she said. The two boys averted their eyes and gazed into a far corner of the room. The woman rushed out of her nightgown and put on a pair of step-ins. She turned to the bed from which she had risen and called, Vera! Get up from there!” (Wright, 1940, p. 19). The terrible condition of life for African American people and their oppression in the society is taken place through the economic forces in the society. The fact that multiple members of the family live in a place like a dungeon signifies their improper condition in the society. These people are the victims of the economy which is the base of the society. Crane describes the condition of the American society in which both labor and real value interact with each other. Maggie cannot be located in Marxist and humanist framework as “above all in the concepts of alienation, of humanism, of the social essence of man, etc. As we know, Marxists did not think to react until very late, and their reaction was often of the same order as their fears and haste” (Althusser,1965, For Marx, p. 156). Maggie is an antihumanist subject living in an antihumanist

society where she has no control over her own actions and thoughts. In humanist sense, Maggie does not experience Hegelian reality and she becomes alienated because for Hegel "Freedom is the fundamental character of the will, as well as its system of specific determinations. Will without freedom is an empty word; freedom does not exist except as the will, and the will is free." (Hegel, 1821, p. 19). It can be perceived that thinking would lead to reality or to find reality one has to use his or her ability of mind. Reality is what Maggie thinks or gets. She believes that she has the tools of perceiving truth in her body and does not need anything from outside to use as a device.

Maggie is a member of lower class whose work is in a factory with the lowest amount of money which means there is no relationship between what she does as a worker and what she gains. This has left her with the sense of lack and inferiority; therefore, she looks for finding a man who is qualified and providing: "Maggie perceived that here was the beau ideal of a man. Her dim thoughts were often searching for faraway lands where, as God says, the little hills sing together in the morning." (Crane, 1893, p. 24).

The effects of capitalism, for these authors, are both direct and indirect and are the result of both short- and long-term processes. Buckley and his social status signify the mechanism of capitalism in the society. In fact, it is due to Buckley's elitism which majority of people including black ones must suffer from poverty: "That's Buckley! He spoke softly to himself. He's running for State's Attorney again. The men were slapping the poster with wet brushes. He looked at the round florid face and wagged his head." (Wright, 1940, p. 27). Buckley and his political and social capitalism refer to the domination of power and corruption in capitalist society in which power is in depth of every layer of the society for the white people.

This fight between the children in the opening of the novel shows the challenges of distinct classes in the society. In other words, how lower people are treated in the society can be shown. As the novel progresses, the tension between the classes increases and they become more violent: "They struck at each other, clinched, and rolled over on the cobble stones. "Smash 'im, Jimmie, kick deh damn guts out of 'im," yelled Pete, the lad with the chronic sneer, in tons of delight" (Crane, 1893, p. 4-5).

According to Crane and the characters in the novel, every member of the lower class is affected by the economic condition of his life. The characters' nature and identity are shaped by different forces which are mostly natural and ideological. Since the surrounding nature of their life shows hostility and violence, so does their nature. The description of their environment would signify this matter.

The beginning of the second chapter is described as such: "Eventually they entered into a dark region where, from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter" (Crane, 1893, p. 6). Using different features including 'dark', 'careening' and 'gruesome' signify the condition. Moreover, how Jimmie's father treats him in the following

sentences foreshadows his future: “The man caught his breath and laughed. He hit his son on the head with the empty pail. As it rolled clanging into the street, Jimmie began to scream and kicked repeatedly at his father’s shins” (Crane, 1893, p. 12). Even their little brother died, the family was not able to bury him properly and “he went away in a white, insignificant coffin, his small waxen hand clutching a flower that the girl, Maggie, had stolen from an Italian” (Crane, 1893, p. 16). The result of such a life condition would be an angry generation that cannot live and enjoy the world since they are condemned.

Wright has depicted the function of repression throughout the novel. In fact, as Mary vanishes, a lot of police forces question the minor groups in the societies including the black people and the communists. Wright mentions:

“He listened; there were throbs of motors; shouts rose from the streets; there were screams of women and curses of men... A medley of crashing sounds came, louder than he had thought that sound could be: horns, sirens, screams. There was hunger in those sounds as they crashed over the roof-tops and chimneys; but under it, low and distinct, he heard voices of fear: curses of men and cries of children. Yes; they were looking for him in every building and on every floor and in every room. They wanted him. His eyes jerked upward as a huge, sharp beam of yellow light shot into the sky. Another came, crossing it like a knife. Then another. Soon the sky was full of them.” (Wright, 1940, p. 225)

Crane has created such a binary of ruling and dominated classes in which Pete and Maggie stand for. How Maggie thinks is closely linked to the idea of the ruling class that is Pete. Therefore, how Maggie thinks favors Pete since her attitude towards Pete makes him look more powerful. Therefore, “Leaning back he regarded with eyes of superiority the scene before them. This attitude affected Maggie strongly. A man who could regard such a sight with indifference must be accustomed to very great things. It was obvious that Pete had been to this place many times before, and was very familiar with it. A knowledge of this fact made Maggie feel little and new” (Crane, 1893, p. 30). This attitude of Maggie is the result of ideological function in the society in which he considers Pete as the superior side and regards herself as the inferior. In fact, Maggie’s downfall is rooted in her own mind and thinking which is the work of ideology. Ideology is the significant function of antihumanist society that controls everything in the society. This means that freedom and awareness in the society are replaced by the antihumanist functions of different forces. Even in this Antihumanist society where Maggie lives, truth is fabricated and the Hegelian concept of truth is rejected for Maggie. Maggie that is considered as the lower class member suffers from the function of ideology in the society. What she considers to be the truth is just a trace of what dominant class desires. Maggie’s passion and demands are rooted in Pete’s control as the symbol of the ruling class. Hence, whatever is said

in the American society are just some concepts and images that attempt to dominate the minds of subjects like Maggie, so that people are not aware of such concepts. In the novel, such concepts exist to control Maggie's mind unconsciously, when Pete and Maggie go to the theatre, the audiences there all listen to the power of America over other nations in the world. This type of ideological function – theatre – within mass Media is visible in the novel when the song deals with American honor to admire the power of America. This ideology within the novel depicts the effect of the American society on its people throughout the toll of media. Crane writes:

“As a final effort, the singer rendered some verses which described a vision of Britain being annihilated by America, and Ireland bursting her bonds. A carefully prepared crisis was reached in the last line of the last verse, where the singer threw out her arms and cried, “The star-spangled banner.” Instantly a great cheer swelled from the throats of the assemblage of the masses. There was a heavy rumble of booted feet thumping the floor. Eyes gleamed with sudden fire, and calloused hands waved frantically in the air.” (Crane, 1893, p. 32)

The conversation between Bigger and Mr. Dalton signify the ideology of the white people who are righteous people and the black people who are the criminals. The way he talks to Bigger shows that Mr. Dalton wants Bigger to confess and be honest with him. In other words, it could establish a friendship and through ideology, he would be able to manipulate Bigger. The fabricated type of consciousness and awareness are the principles of the society in which Bigger lives, in this Antihumanist place, no truth and reality of Hegelian humanism can be found.

From the aforesaid information it can be figured out that consciousness is after finding truth but not the internal truth existing in an object as it is born or formed with. It is act of using knowledge to perceive exterior objects but not subject which is interior. Bernardo Ferro in his article "The Return from Otherness: Hegel's Paradox of Self-consciousness in the Phenomenology of Spirit" puts self-consciousness in concept against consciousness. As he explains, consciousness follows objectivity in its nature. He believes that it is like an author to be in the external world that recognizes the world perfectly while consciousness is unable to know itself as self. Self-consciousness on the other hand focuses on subjectivity than objectivity. It can be understood that self-consciousness is like a mirror that reflects me to myself not others to me or me to others. How black people think within the discourse of American capitalism signifies the presence of ideological power. Bigger's mother considers his son both black and stupid: “He's just crazy,” the mother said, Just plain dumb black crazy.” (Wright, 1940, p. 24). The use of such features manifests that ideology of the white people could affect the minds of the black one. The ideology works in the new discourse in which Bigger is living. Bigger's conversation with her shows the role that ideology is working for Bigger:

“Everything’s simple and nice around here,” Peggy said. “They’ve got millions, but they live like human beings. They don’t put on airs and strut. Mrs. Dalton believes that people should be that way.” “Yessum.” “They’re Christian people and believe in everybody working hard. And living a clean life. Some people think we ought to have more servants than we do, but we get along. It’s just like one big family.” ... “You know; he does a lot for your people.” “My people?” asked Bigger, puzzled. “Yes, the colored people. He gave over five million dollars to colored schools.” (Wright, 1940, p. 62)

Bigger regards himself alienated to these white people due to function of ideology. In fact, power in different layers of the society has dictated Bigger that he cannot be in the same place with the white people since they are different. This relation of power can be found in different aspects of society to maintain the balance between labour that returns to its inherited suffering and the capital which calls other forces to perpetuate the law.

Crane has used the element of illusion as the function of ideological tool, so that the ruling class can preside over and take the control of the society and other classes. As Maggie informs Pete about her hardships in the life, Pete attempts to attract her by telling different lies: “At times Maggie told Pete long confidential tales of her former home life, dwelling upon the escapades of the other members of the family and the difficulties she had to combat in order to obtain a degree of comfort. He responded in tones of philanthropy. He pressed her arm with an air of reassuring proprietorship” (Crane, 1893, p. 53).

Operation of ruling class’s ideology is a visible issue. However, since it was mentioned the power of ideology is so strong that can penetrate and affect different layers of the society. Therefore, whatever the working class believes can be considered as an ideology of ruling class in distorted ways since they are thinking by the rules of the dominant class unconsciously and consequently act in favor of the powerful class. All the characters in the novel are dominated by this type of ideology and how they think reflects the principles of the ruling class. How Pete behaves in the American society and how Maggie thinks both depict the principles of the ruling class.

Maggie here mentions that when she meets Pete, his dressing could attract her and signified Pete’s personality and status in the society. Maggie believes that Pete is the prince that can bring her happiness and save her from her misery. Moreover, Maggie considers him as the one who can control and manipulate the family. In fact, what Maggie here thinks and believes to be right is the result of ideological function that attempts to depict the superiority of the higher class people. In fact, Maggie is the victim of this type of truth in antihumanist sense. She assumes that truth is absolute as in Hegelian term; however, there is no such a truth and Maggie is mesmerized by the mystery of antihumanist ideology and truth.

Throughout "*Native Son*", the author has employed this term and shows that the African American society is the victim of the misrepresentations and illusions in the society Anderson mentioned "The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is Black advancement. It is not the mere presence of Black people that is the problem; rather, it is Blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship." (Anderson, 2016, p. 3.). Bigger's mother holds Bigger responsible for their miserable condition and mentions: "We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you, Aw, don't start that again." (Wright, 1940, p. 23). This statement signifies that it is just because of Bigger's ignorance that they are deep in the poverty. This claim is deeply connected to the ideology of American dream that shows America as a land in which dreams come true.

The class domination takes place through power and misrecognition. Even the crimes of black have systematically been created and defined for them through this process of misrecognition. Since the power is systematically owned by white people, the black people are not allowed to commit crimes against the white people. The ideas of robbing and committing crimes have been misrecognized for the black people as they believe that robbing black people does not have as many consequences as robbing the white people. Bigger believes that if he ever gets the chance, he will wipe out the entire white folks from the society which signifies his obsession with destruction of the white people in his conscious and unconscious psyche. Therefore, this reality for Bigger who is symbol of the black community, reflects his illusionary existence in the American society.

3. Conclusion

The researcher realizes that social struggles are shown in form of inequality among different classes in the society. Moreover, the domination of capitalism in both novels which marginalizes the main characters refers to the social struggles. Moreover, the researcher finds out that the characters do not have any free will and power of choice. This means that they have been the victims of society since antihumanist is dominant in the American society. Related to the third issue, the researcher shows that both Maggie and Bigger have been repressed and violently treated by the ruling classes. Regarding the fourth question, it could be shown that the ideology operates in the life of Maggie and Bigger as well as controlling their unconscious mind. Moreover, the world and the truth are misrepresented for all the characters. The manipulation of the characters through ideological tools has been carried out by the politics.

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